



## An Educational Partnership to Promote Lifelong Leaders

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### **Author Biography**

Jana Mayer is a social studies teacher and coordinator for extended learning for Model Laboratory School. She also works with Primary Talent Pool students as part of the Gifted and Talented program. Jana earned her Rank 1 and Masters in Gifted Education and B.S. in Elementary Education from Eastern Kentucky University.

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# 2020 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## An Educational Partnership to Promote Lifelong Leaders

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*This study focuses on the impact of intentional teaching in the areas of interpersonal and professional skills for students in grades 5-8, and a collaboration between students in the EKV School of Business and Model Laboratory School to apply skills learned in order to develop leadership and entrepreneurial strategies. The study illustrates the positive relationship developed between Model and the EKV School of Business through trainings and events. A series of brief evaluation surveys and other school-level data were used to demonstrate the results of the year-long collaboration. Overall, results demonstrate how both groups of students benefited from the experience.*

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According to recent economic trends, entrepreneurs are the driving force to building business in the United States (Economic Innovation Group, 2019). Experts predict that with information technology and artificial intelligence advancements, “85% of the jobs that today’s learners will be doing in 2030 haven’t been invented yet” (Institute for the Future, 2018, p. 14). By the time today’s middle school students are ready to enter the job market, more than likely, they will play a large role in developing their own profession. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) suggest that educators adapt curriculum to prepare students for this rapidly changing labor market through an increased emphasis on interpersonal skills, creativity, and adaptability. “The need of the day is to turn out employment creators and not employment consumers, we need more entrepreneurial leaders” (Greenberg, et al., 2011, p.11). This startling information is what led our study of how intentional teaching of interpersonal and professional skills, through the partnership between Model Laboratory School and the Eastern Kentucky University School of Business, benefits and prepares 21st century learners and leaders. We focused on preparing students for the real world through the Lifelong Leaders program which involves the application of

soft skills using various tasks and challenges in activities such as The Gauntlet, an educational competition for students in grades 5-8.

### **Program Description and Context**

According to Kilderry (2015), intentional teaching is a process in which educators deliberately and thoughtfully make decisions, exhibit flexibility, and move in and out of roles with changing contexts. The Lifelong Leaders program at Model Laboratory School focuses on intentional teaching of interpersonal and professional skills needed to be successful when interacting with adults and professionals. The program was offered to all students in grades 5-8 through once weekly sessions over the period of six weeks. The Lifelong Leaders teacher provided instruction on proper handshakes, how to interact within a professional setting, appropriate conversation topics, manners, table etiquette, and how to make a lasting and meaningful impression on others. The teacher used various activities such as networking within a room, learning to debate, offering a weather report, and giving an elevator pitch that highlights a student's strengths. The lessons would scaffold on skills learned the previous week to help students become more confident in their interactions and mannerisms. A culminating activity of the program was the Gauntlet, a competition to demonstrate the skills learned by rotating through ten different stations such as a series of one-on-one interviews, a press briefing, giving a weather report, and other challenging scenarios. The intentional teaching and skills practice required students to creatively problem-solve and develop their entrepreneurial thinking.

While Model Laboratory School students were practicing the essential skills of leadership, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) School of Business students were being trained to judge the upcoming Gauntlet. The university students were offered an opportunity to participate in this program to fulfill an upper-class-level professional development requirement. Typically, EKU School of Business students complete this requirement by attending seminars and networking events, but the Lifelong Leaders program included opportunities to partner with Model Laboratory School to serve and teach. "Service-learning offers effective pedagogical strategies and enhances student development through active learning and participation, engagement in the community, critical thinking, and information on real-life conflictual situations" (Wells & Grabert, 2004, p. 573). To prepare for their role as a judge in the Gauntlet, the student judges were trained in the EKU Career and Cooperative Education Center to ensure they knew the correct behaviors and mannerisms to look for in the Model students. This

proved to be beneficial for them because they received training in interview skills that enhanced their own experiences and skill sets, and they improved their skills further through judging and providing feedback to the younger students. Conventional wisdom indicates that successful leadership comes from experience; therefore, the more experience one has, the better equipped they will be for leadership (Bottomley & Burgess, 2018). As one of the ECU School of Business students stated when asked about her experience as a judge:

“The skills the students were learning are some of the same skills I’ve learned/am learning as a business student. It was a learning opportunity for me to see what some of the students did really well and where they needed improvement...Since I’m graduating soon, I am preparing for interviews and networking events with potential employers. So, throughout the competition, I got to see through the eyes of an employer. It helped me to pick up on attributes about myself that I can improve on for my future!”

Model Laboratory School (2020) ensures a world-class education through a curriculum that is based on a set of competencies designed to ultimately prepare students for college and career through what is known as the Model Core. The Lifelong Leaders Program addressed the following aims of the Model Core:

- *to provide opportunities for students to develop as leaders:* achieved by discussing and practicing the professional and personal skills of leaders;
- *to develop transferable, transportable skills through practice and with feedback:* achieved through in-class practice and the Gauntlet with feedback on their performance from the business school student judges and/or teacher;
- *to develop strong oral communication:* demonstrated through the interaction with the judges in the Gauntlet; and,
- *to think critically and creatively:* exhibited through interaction with the business school student judges in the Gauntlet which required them to think quickly and be creative in responses.

The Lifelong Leaders program provided numerous opportunities for students in grades 5-8 to apply and integrate a number of transfer skills and competencies of the Model Core. The themes of the Gauntlet stations required that students reflect on content from science, social studies, the arts, literature and other current events. This was an additional planned benefit of the program and a

key element for achieving buy-in from classroom teachers to allow time for the curriculum to be provided during class.

## **Program Analysis**

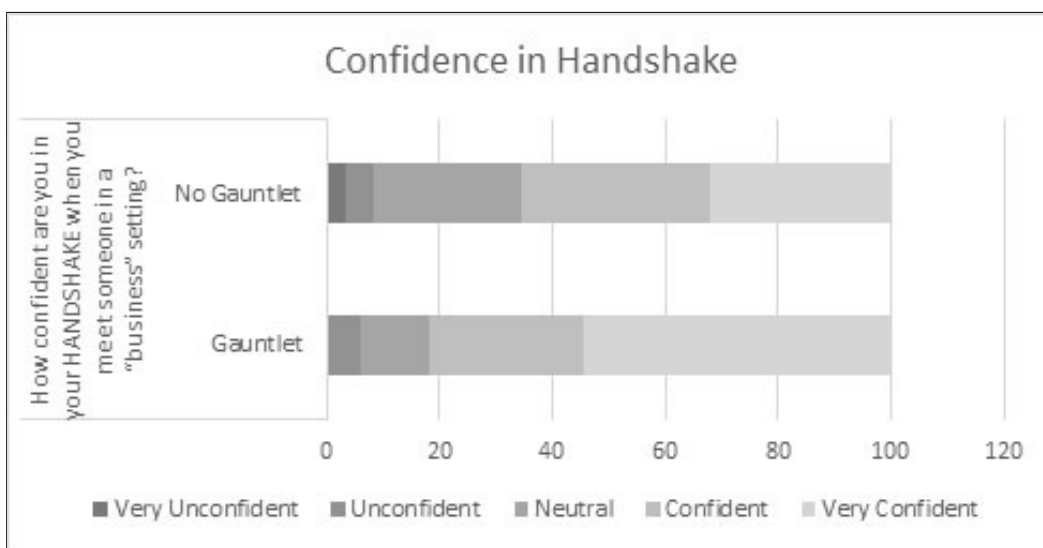
To analyze effects of the Lifelong Leaders program, we conducted a program evaluation documenting that value was added as expressed by various stakeholders. After receiving IRB approval, we collected survey data from the students in grades 5-8 and also requested and received data about their academic abilities from the school. Because the lessons in the Lifelong Leaders program were taught to all of the students, but the Gauntlet competition was voluntary, we sought to identify any differences between students who chose to participate in this competition in October and those who did not. We surveyed all of the students in grades 5-8 for feedback.

We focused on behavior related to the aims of the Model Core (Model Laboratory School, 2020), specifically analyzing self-confidence of participants. *A priori*, we hypothesized that students who chose to participate in the competition would report that they were more confident about their soft skills after completing the lessons than those who chose not to participate in the Gauntlet. In explaining the theory of planned behavior, Ajzen (1991) writes that behavioral achievement is commonly understood as depending on both motivation or intention and ability or behavioral control. Since the Gauntlet was an optional activity, we hypothesized that students who liked the active lessons and content would feel confident and be motivated to participate. Also, there is a long-recognized positive association in research between self-confidence and leadership ability (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Kipnis & Lane, 1962), which indicates that our students who report high levels of self-confidence and choose to participate in the high-energy, competitive Gauntlet activity are also developing strong leadership skills. In addition, we used academic ability indicators to test for any difference between those who did and did not participate in the Gauntlet.

From the 236 students in grades 5-8, we received 157 usable surveys with 124 respondents that did not participate in the Gauntlet competition (63% response rate) and 33 that did (87% response rate). The two sets of data were similar in grade level distribution, gender, and gifted status. The most surprising result was how little difference there was between the two groups. Because the Gauntlet was an optional activity offered in the evening, many students had other conflicts such as athletics or clubs. Also, some were not able to get a ride back to school for the competition. So, while participation was voluntary, it was not an entirely free

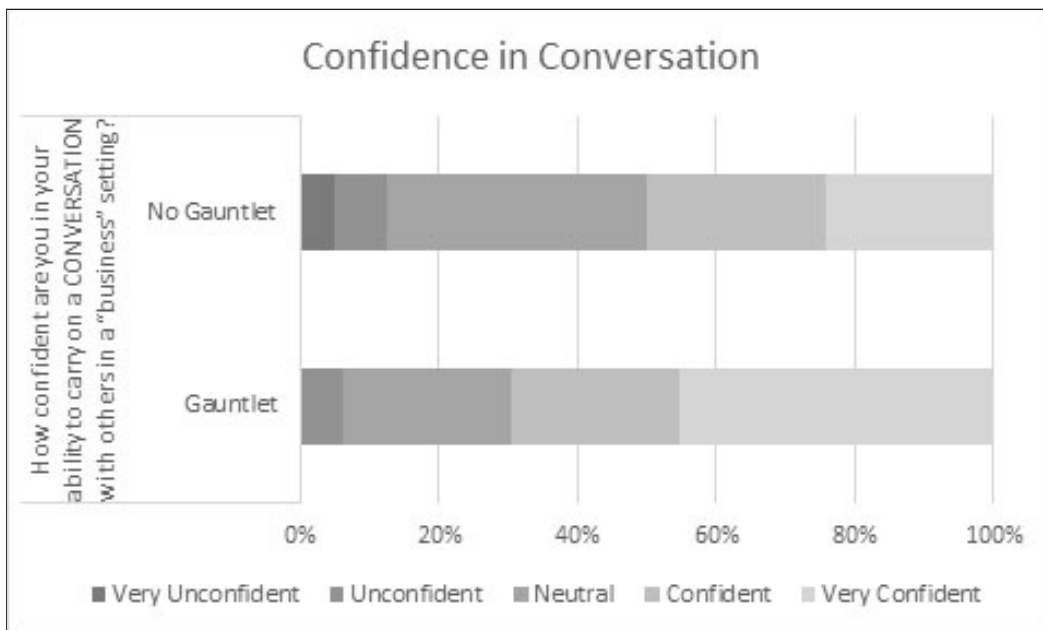
choice for young teen students to make, as evidenced by 56% of those who chose not to participate in the Gauntlet reporting that they had a conflict or forgot about the event. However, another 35% of those that did not participate reported that they were shy or did not want to mess up or they just did not want to participate indicating that they did choose not to participate.

To test our hypothesis that young students who participate in the program will report a higher sense of confidence when meeting new people in a business setting, we asked students to rate their level of confidence about introducing oneself, one’s handshake, carrying on conversation, and dining manners. In analyzing the results for the two student groups, we found that the Gauntlet group reported more confidence in introducing themselves, shaking hands, and carrying on conversations, and the groups were approximately equally highly confident in their dining manners. While none of the differences in the distributions of self-reported confidence ratings were statistically significant between the two groups of students, results for the two areas where the most difference was observed are provided below in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, the top bar shows confidence ratings for the No Gauntlet group when shaking hands while meeting someone in a business setting, and the bottom bar shows confidence ratings for the students who did participate in the Gauntlet in the same type of setting. Clearly, the group of students that chose to and were able to participate in the Gauntlet competition reported higher levels of confidence in their handshake when meeting someone in a business setting. The percent of students that were neutral in their self-assessment of confidence was quite a bit higher for the students who did not participate in the Gauntlet.



**Figure 1.** Levels of Confidence in Handshake for Gauntlet and No Gauntlet Student Groups

In Figure 2, the top bar shows confidence ratings for the No Gauntlet group regarding their ability to carry on a conversation with others in a business-type setting while the bottom bar shows the same ratings of confidence levels for the Gauntlet group. Again, a higher percentage of the No Gauntlet group is Neutral while a higher percentage of the Gauntlet group is Very Confident. Using a chi-square inferential statistical test to determine if the results between the two groups are different, we find no statistically significant difference either for confidence in handshakes or confidence in conversations. Although the Gauntlet group did report higher levels of confidence, the differences are not different than what we might expect by chance alone.



**Figure 2.** Levels of Confidence in Conversation for Gauntlet and No Gauntlet Student Groups

Next, we surveyed other groups that were integral parts of the Lifelong Leaders program, including the School of Business student judges, middle-school teachers, and parents of middle-school student participants. As summarized in Borup, et al. (2014), researchers have described the importance of learner interactions in adolescents, specifically identifying learner-content, learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-environment interactions as important. Students interact with materials, teachers, peers, and families or communities, and learning can occur at all of these levels of contact. The Lifelong Leaders program at Model provides opportunities for all of these types of interaction, and we surveyed the various stakeholder groups to document their assessment of the value of the program and the types of learning that occurred.



Seven ECU School of Business students accepted the opportunity to participate as judges in the Lifelong Leaders program and hone their own skills while teaching them to younger students. This also provided instruction from someone other than the younger students' own teachers which can benefit adolescents. The primary reasons the business students cited for participating are that they wanted to connect more with the School of Business, work with kids, and interact with the community. They also thought that the content is important and wanted to earn required credit. After they participated, they all said they would do this program again and would recommend it to others. They reported that they learned more about soft skills and sharpened their own while practicing them.

The four middle school teachers who offered feedback agreed that the Lifelong Leaders lessons helped students to be more successful and more aware of the importance of their interactions with others. One teacher recommended strengthening the program by having students interact more with other adults that are not their teachers. All of the teachers commented that the program should be an integrated part of the school day for the whole school. Teachers also mentioned the importance of these skills and expectations being built into part of the school climate throughout the year. One teacher summarized the value of the program by saying, "In all my years of teaching, this program is the most valuable I have witnessed to help students succeed in school, life, and future endeavors!"

Parents reported that the program helped their kids with public speaking, self-confidence, comfort with unfamiliar settings, professional skills, career or college readiness, etiquette, and engagement in current events. One parent remarked that many of the skills are the transfer skills of the Model Core. All of the parents did want to see the program continue at the school, and most parents felt that it should be included as part of the school day where it would provide valuable exposure to all kids and not just those who chose to or were able to participate after school.

## **Discussion**

To adequately prepare students for the changing workforce, students must be equipped with "soft skills". Research shows that workers rely heavily on interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and good communication skills. Nearly 60% of current workers indicated that public K-12 schools should play a large role in fostering these skills (Pew Research Center, 2016). The benefits of the educational partnership between the ECU School of Business students and Model Laboratory School that were developed through the Lifelong Leaders program show promise

in equipping both the middle school students and, simultaneously, the college student partners with these transferable skills that are central to the Model core. The successes and benefits of the program as noted by participants, teachers, and parents would not have been achieved without the pedagogical strategies of students as partners and intentional teaching that required a planned curriculum with a built-in notion of flexibility within the contexts presented.

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